

THE BLACKFEET

[ca. 1700]

[12] ticipation in the white man's fur trade. When elderly Blackfoot
[179] Indians refer to this pre-horse period they commonly identify it
by the expression, "When we had only dogs for moving camp."
Let us simply refer to that time as "dog days."

175 No white man visited the Blackfeet in dog days, so we have
no contemporary descriptions of their life in those times. Never-
theless, we need not rely entirely upon Blackfoot traditions to
gain a general impression of their life in dog days.

David Thompson, an intelligent, inquisitive fur trader, spent
the winter of 1787-88 in a Piegan village in present southern
Alberta. There were aged men in that Indian camp who recalled
from personal experience tribal life in dog days. When Thomp-
son sought to determine the origin of these Indians, they "always
pointed out the North West as the place they came from, and
their progress has always been to the southwest. Since the
Traders came to the Saskatchewan River, this has been their
course and progress for the distance of four hundred miles from
the Eagle Hills to the Mountains near the Missouri but this
rapid advance may be mostly attributed to their being armed
with guns and iron weapons." Thompson's elderly informants
made it clear that in their youth the Blackfeet possessed no fire-
arms and neither horses nor canoes.* They were nomads who
hunted game and fought enemy tribesmen with primitive weap-
ons of their own manufacture. They traveled overland on foot.
Their only domesticated animal was the dog.

411 So we may picture those aboriginal Blackfoot Indians living
231 in the valley of the North Saskatchewan near the Eagle Hills in
501 the early years of the eighteenth century, just before the dawn
224 of history in that region. North of that great eastward-flowing
721 river was the coniferous forest. The Blackfoot homeland lay
481 south of that thickly wooded area in a country of grassy prairies
231 broken by forested hills, timbered river valleys, and lakes of dif-
131 ferent sizes. Here the primitive Blackfeet found the necessities
of life—wild game, wild plant foods, water, and firewood.

* David Thompson, *David Thompson's Narrative of his Explorations in West-
ern America, 1784-1812*, 328-34, 348.

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224 fresh meat and a surplus that could be preserved for consumption through the hard winter months when intense cold and heavy snows might make hunting impossible. If corraling proved a failure it meant short rations. Should exhaustion of food reserves coincide with winter storms the band went hungry. If there was no break in the weather they starved.

361 Through the dead of winter the Blackfoot bands pitched their lodges among the trees in sheltered valleys offering maximum protection from winds and snow. It would have been suicidal for them to have remained in the open country for extended periods at that treacherous season. In stormy weather they huddled close to their campfires, which they fed with wood from near-by trees.

224 But when the skies cleared they scoured the wooded areas for buffalo or smaller game, or they ventured out into the open country to kill buffalo that had bogged down in snowdrifts or fallen into ravines. On these short hunting trips they probably traveled on snowshoes. In late winter and early spring, when the supply of fresh meat was low, the Blackfoot hunters, alone or in small groups, stalked the buffalo. By approaching under a wolfskin or buffalo robe disguise while cleverly mimicking the actions of the animal they represented, they could get near enough to the wary buffalo to rise and make their kill with bow and arrow at close range.

221 When the snows melted and the ice in the rivers began to break up, the period of the winter camp came to an end. Joyfully, the Indians took down their lodges, packed their belongings, and once again journeyed over the grasslands on their co-operative, warm-weather hunts.

262 So long as there was buffalo available, these Indians needed no other meat. Buffalo flesh, with its rich, gamy taste, was both

237 delicious and nourishing. This big-game animal furnished a host of other useful materials. Dressed cowskins sewn together with

[342] sinew of the same animal served for lodge covers. The heavy

[241] winter hides, covered with thick, shaggy hair, were wrapped around the body, hair side in, to make warm, snug overcoats.

[513] They also served for bedding. From winter hides they also made

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1911 Kroeber (1939, p. 82) regarded the Blackfoot as "ancient occupants of the northern true plains or rather of the foothills of the Rockies and the plains tributary thereto." However, David Thompson, in 1787, found that the testimony of elderly Piegan (born and raised in the Pedestrian Culture Period) clearly pointed to that tribe's residence on the Saskatchewan Plains, near the Eagle Hills, some 400 miles east of the Rockies, in the early 18th century. It was not until after the Blackfoot tribes obtained both horses and guns that they pushed southwestward to the foothills of the mountains and the area that became their historic homeland (Thompson, 1916, pp. 327-329, 348).

Blackfoot traditions support this interpretation of the southwestward movement of these people in early historic times. This movement is also attested by traditions of the Flathead and Kutenai, whom the Blackfoot drove from the eastern foothills of the Rockies in present Alberta and Montana (Ferris, 1940, pp. 90-92; Thompson, 1916, pp. 304, 327-344, 463; Teit, 1930, pp. 316-321).

Assuming that the Piegan lived near the Eagle Hills and the Blood and North Blackfoot resided at no great distance from them to the northward or eastward in the period immediately preceding their acquisition of horses, it follows that the Blackfoot tribes were on the grassy plains well within the range of the buffalo at that time. This locality was north of the known limits of aboriginal maize cultivation in the Great Plains. Although the Blackfoot probably grew small plots of tobacco, it is improbable that they raised food crops. [241]
[433] They were hunters of buffalo and smaller game and collectors of wild plant foods in season.

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[501] Thompson also found that elderly Piegan had "no tradition that they ever made use of canoes" (Thompson, 1916, p. 348). It appears clear, then, that the pre-horse Blackfoot of the early 18th century [481]
[221] were pedestrians. Presumably they walked over the Plains, carrying their possessions by dog transport and on their own backs, in quest of buffalo, in warmer weather and retreated to timbered river valleys or to marginal forested areas in winter. The basic economy [433] of the historic Blackfoot, characterized by dependence upon the buffalo for food, some clothing, and shelter (lodge covers), antedated the Horse Culture Period.

HORSE ACQUISITION AS A STIMULUS TO CULTURAL INNOVATION

231 The horse differed both physically and behaviorly from the dog, which had been the Indian's only domesticated animal and only beast of burden in the Pedestrian Culture period. This fact alone required [182] extensive adjustments in the daily habits of Indians who undertook to acquire, breed, care for, and use horses.

recognized. A good race horse or a buffalo runner was worth several common pack animals. Consequently the best horses had a premium value in trades involving items other than horses. Even more subtle distinctions were made between the worth of two race horses or two buffalo horses. Wealthy men were expected to pay more dearly than were people of modest means. 175
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Live horses were always more valuable to the Blackfoot than were dead ones. These Indians seldom killed horses for food, and then only in cases of dire necessity. The hide, hair, teeth, and other horse products made into useful articles were derived from animals which had died of accidental or natural causes. The number of these items was very restricted in comparison with the great variety of useful articles derived from buffalo. 237

INFLUENCE ON RECREATION

The prominent role of the horse in Blackfoot children's play during the Horse Culture Period mirrored the importance of that animal in the life of their parents at that time. Children's play of the Pedestrian Culture Period probably tended to imitate the serious activities of their elders, and so differed from that of later children. When boys made and played with wood, stone, or mud toy horses, or pretended to ride boldly on hobbyhorses; when girls "moved camp" with conventionalized stick horses equipped with miniature reproductions of riding and transport gear bearing miniature household equipment packaged and packed according to the custom of their culture, they were pleasantly and painlessly preparing themselves for more responsible participation in a culture in which management and use of horses were important aspects of daily life. 175
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Horse racing probably replaced foot racing as the most popular sport of Blackfoot adults. Buffalo hunting, interband communications, and intertribal warfare in the Pedestrian Culture Period must have placed a premium upon physical stamina and speed of foot. The great Miniconjou chief, One Horn, bragged to Catlin of his former ability to run down a buffalo on foot and kill it with an arrow, as well as his record of having won every foot race he had entered (Catlin, 1841, vol. 1, p. 211). Yet the ability to run down a buffalo may have been fairly common in earlier times, when everyone hunted on foot. As late as the middle of the 19th century Denig (1930, p. 566) noted that next to being a good hunter and warrior men of the Upper Missouri tribes prized "the name of being a good runner (fast and long)." Foot racing survived among the historic Blackfoot in intersociety contests at the Sun Dance encampment, but horse racing surpassed it in popular interest. Stamina, a quality necessary to the 174
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BACKSIDE-TO-THE-FIRE PIPE

OPENING CEREMONY: 1972

NinnaOnesta—Albert Chief Calf—was the crier on the morning of the Backside-to-the-Fire Pipe ceremony. He came around early, announcing that Jim Twig was going to open his Medicine Pipe. Not yet having fulfilled his annual obligation of having the Bundle opened, Jim Twig wanted to do this before starting the Bundle's transfer ceremony. All past and present Medicine Pipe Owners were invited, according to custom. 778
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NinnaOnesta wore a black cowboy hat with a red-dyed eagle plume fastened to one side, and a pink scarf around his neck. He had on his ever-present sunglasses, and in one hand carried a cane. At the age of seventy-seven he was still a sturdy and strong-voiced man. Here is what we heard him say: "Hurry up! Hurry up, all of you people who want to see the Medicine Pipe Dance. [Jim Twig] is going to open his sacred Pipe today. He wants to get started early so that we can finish before dark. Oki, all of you Akai-Namaskaniks [past Medicine Pipe Men], all of you Ninamaskaniks, you are invited. Bring your bowls. All of you people who want to see the ceremony, you are invited to come to the yellow-painted Elk Tipi. Hurry Up!" [291]
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We got up and made our incense. SikskiAki no longer took our Bundle outside to hang over the doorway during the day. The Old Man told us that there were too many casual visitors now in camp who had no idea how to show proper respect for such a sacred thing. As we made our incense, we prayed for our success with the Spirit of the Old Ways; we dwelled on good thoughts about our own life. 778
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We were about to eat breakfast when Mrs. Stabs Down came in. Our Bundle had last been kept by her and her husband for the benefit of their children, who had been initiated as Owners. By tradition she is now our "Mother." She had 778
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21: Hungry Wolf F-4,5 (ca. 1972) 1977
NF6 Blackfoot NF6
Blood



Frank Red Crow, or Close Shooter, during
the ceremony. On his right is Bob Plaited
Hair.

[p.154-C]

BLACKFEET AND BUFFALO

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[533] hidden in the timber during the day, was likely to be discovered by enemies, who would then look for its rider. Well, my visitors soon left. I slung to my sides my war sack and sacred, slender-cased, war bonnet, took my rifle, and started off upon the long, southward trail that I was to follow—my women, as I had ordered, singing the Wolf Song, good-luck song for the hunter, the warrior, as I left them.

721 Day was near when I arrived at *Osaks Ituktai* (Backfat Creek, Dupuyer Creek) and went into hiding in its brush for the day. Three mornings later I came to where Bear River joins Big River (Marias and Missouri rivers), and there, needing meat, I killed a deer. In the evening I built a small raft to keep my belongings dry, and, swimming and pushing it, crossed to Big River's south shore. I was then two nights in making Yellow (Judith) River, right where we Pikunis had camped and hunted four winters back. And sad were my thoughts; then there had been plenty of buffalo on the plains, plenty of deer and elk in the mountains. How happy we all had been there until

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[130] some white soldiers arrived and said that they were come to move us back to our own country, to our agency on Badger Creek. Our chiefs told the soldier chief that we were, right there, in our own country; that twenty-five winters back, at the mouth of Yellow River, we had made a treaty with some of Our Grandfather's men, and they had put into writing the fact that from Elk (Yellowstone) River north to the Red Coats' country and from the summit of the Backbone (Rocky Mountains) between them and east to the mouth of Little (Milk) River was the country of us Blackfoot tribes. But the soldier chief said that our chiefs were wrong; that, many winters back, Our Grandfather had ordered that all of the country from Elk River north to Bear River was the country of the whites, and that we would have to pack up at once and return to our agency. So that we had to do, because we could not fight the many white soldiers who would attack us, kill off our women and children if we refused to go. So was it that we never again had buffalo; so was it that, for lack of them, many of our people died. And now there were no more buffalo; the whites had killed them all off. Close above where I lay hidden in the Yellow River brush were some white men's

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CHARACTERISTICS OF THE BLACKFEET

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[439] able to buy them of the traders and they are no longer manufactured. It is doubtful whether a single specimen has been preserved to the present day.

KNIVES

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324 Their knives were made of flint, wrought into shape by a laborious process.

WATER VESSELS

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237 Their water vessels were made of the paunch of animals, usually the buffalo.

BOATS

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[481] The Blackfeet never made boats of any description, any account to the contrary being erroneous. In crossing streams they made a kind of float from the skin covering of their lodges, upon or within which their effects were placed, men, women and children swimming, the warriors [492] towing the floats by a cord held in the mouth. Such horses as were fit for that service were also made to do duty in [481] transporting their riders. By these means a village of 500 lodges would cross a considerable stream within an hour's time.

WAR CLUB, LANCE

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[439] The Blackfeet used a war club of wood. They had no lances until they were introduced among them by the white traders.

VEGETABLE FOOD

262 Their only vegetable food was such as grew wild in their country, consisting principally of a wild turnip, choke cherries, currants, gooseberries, strawberries, bull berries and a bitter white berry that grows upon the red willow; of the latter they were very fond. Service berries were the most common and most esteemed.

SHIELDS

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[237] Their shields were made of buffalo hide, about half an inch thick, by a long and tedious process rendering them as hard as bone, so that they would turn an arrow and